

**Appropriations Committee
Health Subcommittee
February 24, 2022**

**Public Hearing on:
House Bill 5037 AAC the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30th, 2023
(Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services)**

Good evening, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and members of the Appropriations Committee.

Hi- I am Kristie Scott, CEO of Perception Programs in Willimantic, CT. Our behavioral health agency provides substance use, mental health, harm reduction, and re-entry services to over 3,000 individuals a year in Northeast CT. We also employ 120 employees and have been in operation since the 1970s.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the state budget.

I want to thank you for the 4% Cost of Living Adjustment for community nonprofits that you fought to include in last year's budget. I'm here tonight to ask you to honor the long-term plan to address underfunding of community nonprofits and fund services by \$461 million over five years – or an **additional 8% in Fiscal Year 2023**.

Without it, we risk destabilizing our state's community service delivery system which has been upended by the pressures of COVID-19 and an exponential increase in the need for service in our communities. At the same time, we're facing unprecedented challenges recruiting and retaining staff of all skill levels and salaries.

Currently in our outpatient Behavioral Health Centers we have a wait list of 231 individuals. Waits list equate to clients not getting services, which could ultimately lead to deaths via overdose or suicide. We are triaging clients daily, deciding who can be seen for a 15 minute check-in or a half hour session, just to be able to fit more people on the schedule. This is not a good clinical care model. At this point, we are running on a harm reduction model. Our supervisors and program directors are carrying a caseload on top of their regular duties. This leads to burn out!

In the last 30 days I attended three Root Cause Analyses of client's deaths via overdose/suicide. Three in 30 day is a scary number- a sad, sad number. These were being seen a regular basis, so just imagine what is happening to individuals that we can't even get in the door.

These wait lists are occurring because we can't hire clinicians fast enough. Despite attending a DMHAS collaborative on recruitment and retention, things are not getting easier. We finally had to increase salaries with no funding from DMHAS and this will have a huge effect on our bottom line. A Master's level trained clinician has attended school 6 years, completed two full unpaid internships, and will land a job making \$45-50K their first year. My pet sitter with no graduate

level education makes \$70K a year with holiday bonuses from her clients. This is absurd and I am truly afraid that fewer and fewer individuals are going to choose to work in nonprofit agencies that serve the most vulnerable population. They won't be able to afford to, especially with debts from their education.

Human services are now in competition for staff with private companies. Clinical staff are being lured away by lucrative offers from school districts and telehealth companies. Across the state, The Alliance found that 18%, nearly 1 in 5, nonprofit jobs are vacant right now.

As a behavioral health provider, your commitment to increase funding by \$461 million is needed now more than ever as we are seeing an increase in the need for mental health and addiction services. I have been encouraged to see the legislature's focus and attention on this crisis this year. But I want to be clear: **There is no way to address the gaps in the mental health system without addressing the chronic underfunding of the existing services provided by nonprofits.**

The Governor's proposed budget new behavioral health services and initiatives, for which we are thankful, but it does not provide support to existing programs that are struggling to keep up with the demand for services. **We urge the Appropriations Committee to fight for funding for these programs by implementing The Alliance's plan for a \$461 million increase.**

The Governor's budget does propose several new programs for which we urge your support, including:

- Expanding Mobile Crisis services to be available 24/7 using ARPA funding, which will be important especially as the state rolls out 9-8-8.
- 26 new community placements from CVH and Whiting.
- Funding to place peer support specialists in Connecticut's 12 busiest hospitals. This will improve the connection to services of people who are hospitalized with a mental health crisis or who go to the emergency room. It is important to note, however, that this program will increase referrals to existing community programs and increase in demand which is not funded in the proposed budget.

Behavioral health needs continue to increase, with providers seeing an unprecedented high volume of people in crisis as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc on communities.

Community nonprofits are ready and able to support people struggling with mental health – but we need your help to ensure that current services are available and accessible.

Thank you.

Kristie Scott, LCSW

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